

Disability In Higher Education: Redefining Mainstreaming

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses key issues in mainstreaming and inclusion for postsecondary students with disabilities and the subtle ways in which students and educators with disabilities can be marginalized. The paper also considers the exclusion of disability in conversations about diversity in higher education.

Keywords: Disability, mainstreaming, universal design, universal instructional design, access

INTRODUCTION

The population of students pursuing higher education is becoming increasingly diverse (Crissman Ishler, 2005). Throughout the world, educators are striving to enhance educational opportunity for students from historically underserved populations (David, in press; Ferrier & Heagney, 2008; Higbee, 2009). A growing body of research indicates that being part of a diverse educational community can enhance growth and development in important skills like leadership, critical thinking, and cross-cultural communication (Antonio, 2001; Barron, Pieper, Lee, Nantharath, Higbee, & Schultz, 2007; Blimling, 2001; Gurin Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Maruyama, Nirebim, Gudeman, & Marin, 2000; Milem & Hakuta, 2000; Pascarella, Palmer, Moye, & Pierson, 2001; Smith & Schonfeld, 2000; Terenzini, Cabrera, Colbeck, Bjorklund, & Parent, 2001; Zuñiga, 2003). However, this research has focused primarily on racial and ethnic diversity; in conversations about diversity in higher education, disability is seldom mentioned (McCune, 2001).

The purpose of this paper is to address disability and mainstreaming in postsecondary education, with the focus going beyond mainstreaming students with disabilities in the classroom to discussion of how the topic of disability is marginalized in other ways as well, even in inclusive conversations about diversity. It is important to provide a context for reflection on why this matters, why it should be a critical issue of concern in postsecondary education today.

BACKGROUND

Approximately 1 in 5 people in the U.S. has a disability, while 1 in 10 has been diagnosed with a severe disability (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1997). With respect to an individual, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), as amended in 2008, defines the term “disability” as:

a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of such individual. . . major life activities include, but are not limited to, caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, seeing, hearing, eating, sleeping, walking, standing, lifting, bending, speaking, breathing, learning, reading, concentrating, thinking, communicating, and working. . . . a major life activity also includes the operation of a major bodily function, including but not limited to, functions of the immune system, normal cell growth, digestive, bowel, bladder, neurological, brain, respiratory, circulatory, endocrine, and reproductive functions. (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009)